

Science Fiction Series

No. 17

THE SPECTRE BULLET

By Thomas Mack

AND

THE AVENGING NOTE

By Alfred Sprissler



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The Spectre Bullet

By Thomas Mack

THE figure of the enraged man on the screen grew to a close-up of giant proportions. The revolver gripped between taut fingers was raised with menacing deliberation, its death-dealing muzzle directed at the cowering man alone in the box to the right of the stage. From the contorted lips of the silver sheet hero a single epithet was flung.

"Cur!"

The man thus unflatteringly addressed rose trembling to his feet, his eyes wide and frenzied. He half turned in a gesture of flight. The gun on the screen spoke explosively, ominously, with a flash of flame and smoke. The face of the man in the box reflected terror, daze, wonderment. Upon the stiff white shirt bosom of his correct evening attire appeared a small red blot, which abruptly widened in a sanguinary puddle. The vindictive face upon the screen laughed in unholy triumph. For an interminable minute the wounded man stood in an attitude of arrested motion, reached out his hands in a blind, groping appeal, then fell inertly to the floor.

Two ushers in uniforms of military gray appeared magically from the back of the balcony and rushed to the box. With the limp figure between them they emerged from the box and staggered up the aisle to the door of the men's smoking room.

Very realistic, very gripping it all was. The spellbound audience, recovering from the hypnotic grip of the innovation, burst out in a furious tempest of applause. The newest wrinkle in the "talkies." The idea of planting characters around the house had been used before and successfully in occasional "thrillers," but it remained for Sarson to introduce the idea to motion pictures.

The story "The Spectre Bullet" told was of an actor who recognized in the audience an enemy who had done him a grievous wrong. Dave Grierson interpreted the part of the villain; Erle Mertle that of the man wronged. In the picture, Mertle discovers the presence of Grierson just as he has drawn a bead upon another character on the stage. The instinct for vengeance in Mertle is so strong that in the stress of his emotions he turns the gun upon Grierson in the box. Grierson is so overcome with terror that he experiences all the throes of a man who is shot.

An avenging fate, the author left a credulous audience to assume, had wrought this miracle of retribution.

In the showing of the film at the Regent, as arranged by Howard Sarson, the auditorium of the theatre in the picture, as distinct from the stage, had been deleted, the audience in the

Regent taking the place of the one pictured upon the screen. And Mertle, instead of aiming his gun at a celluloid Grierson, pulled the trigger upon a real flesh and blood Grierson in the theatre box.

His thick body wedged into a balcony seat, Emmet Reardon, first-grade detective, was among those who thrilled to the vibrations of the climax. Reardon was a thrill-lover extraordinary.

Reardon was enjoying himself hugely. The performance was really a gala occasion, for occupying the first box, across from the one Grierson had emoted in, was none other than Marcus Kelter himself, the producer. Kelter, a widower, sat in solitary state. In the second box, directly in back of him, were Erle Mertle and Ruth Wesson, the heroine of the picture. According to gossip, Mertle and Miss Wesson were engaged. With the late Grierson removed from the scene, the detective was now feasting his eyes on this triumvirate of celebrities. He became aware that something was amiss.

One of the ushers who had helped carry Grierson to the smoking room had appeared in Kelter's box. The fellow's manner was agitated and unstrung. Whatever he said had a like effect upon the producer, who arose to his feet with an amazed look, and, leaning across the rail that intervened between the two boxes, said something in a tense, guarded way to Erle Mertle. The actor murmured hurriedly to Ruth Wesson, and he and Kelter made a hasty exit to the balcony.

A CLOSER view of the men's faces as they passed near him was enough to convince Detective Reardon that his services were in demand. Kelter's normally ruddy complexion had taken on a white, pasty look, while Erle Mertle's professionally handsome features seemed actually to sag. What was in back of this mysterious perturbation? Hoisting himself from between the arms of his seat, Reardon determined to find out.

On the leather settee that extended along the wall lay David Grierson. That splotch of crimson at his bosom made him a tragic and ghastly figure. But that was only a physical indication of something infinitely more horrible.

A long stride brought the heavy detective to the lounge. Reardon's great bulk had a rubber-like elasticity when in action. Howard Sarson, leaning over the supine figure in a sort of dazed futility, made room, as though instinctively he recognized the breath of the law. Kelter and Mertle crowded in back of the detective, the two ushers taking their post at the door to repel the curious public who were already gathering around outside. Gingerly the detective touched the red smear with a finger tip.

"It really is blood," he murmured, almost to himself.

Howard Sarson nodded in stupefied assent, pointing to the dead man's right hand.

"It really is. That stain on his hand comes from a small phial he was supposed to crush on his shirt front. He was shot before he had a chance to use it. As he fell he broke it."

"Shot!" cried Marcus Kelter in a hoarse, incredulous voice.

"He was shot all right," Reardon confirmed.

"But heavens, man!" protested Erle Mertle in the clipped, affected accent of the stage—"how could he be shot? Preposterous! The only shot fired came from my gun on the screen! And none of us are crazy enough to believe, Mr.—"

"Reardon is the name, from detective headquarters."

"Not *that*, but some bullet did," came from the detective grimly.

"Unbelievable! Amazing!" Kelter contributed in a thick, stunned voice.

"Amazing, but we *have* to believe it," Reardon averred.

"We can't deny the evidence of our senses."

"No, we can't deny that Dave has been shot," Howard Sarson said in a thoughtful practical manner.

The manager shook a baffled head. He looked something like Kelter, but was taller and inclined to be reddish. The detective fingered a pendulous lower lip. Murder, the most startling, the most sensational of the year had been committed. The three men in the room with him were intimates of the victim. Being intimates did not necessarily imply friendship—but rather acquaintanceship. And acquaintanceship was essential as a motive for the slaying. It had hardly been done by a stranger. Was any one of these three men involved in the deed?

There was a phone booth in the room and Reardon gave headquarters a brief account of the affair.

The anxious, bewitching face of Ruth Wesson was revealed in the opening. She was a tall girl and fair, of the prize-contest beauty type. The detective was impressed by her evident effort to restrain her emotions—emotions deeper than mere fright and curiosity. In the depths of her blue eyes lurked actual terror.

"Erle—oh, Erle," she said brokenly.

Mertle, reaching the door in a stride, was all solicitude.

"I'm sorry, Ruth," he said contritely—"I had to leave you."

She shrank back from him, her eyes upon his face in a strange mixture of fear and fascination. He reached out to take her hand consolingly and the ornate pin-seal bag she held fell to the floor at Detective Reardon's feet. The eyes of the man from headquarters, as he stooped gallantly to retrieve it, blinked startledly. The bag had struck the floor with a metallic clink, more solid than that given out by the impedimenta found ordinarily in a lady's handbag. Also he found it to be surprisingly heavy.

Ruth Wesson, her face an ashen-white against its make-up, snapped the bag from his fingers. But not before the detective had inquisitively caressed the outlines of the bulky object responsible for its puzzling weight.

Accusations

THE detective turned away, but not out of earshot, while Mertle assuaged the girl's agitation with cooing words. Talk of their engagement was probably authentic, as certainly they seemed more than mere friends. At least there was no doubt of the actor's ardor, although Ruth Wesson's conduct was somewhat puzzling. Becoming interested in a conversation between Marcus Kelter and Sarson, it was a minute before the detective realized that the couple had stepped outside through the door.

"I suppose," the producer was saying in a low, thoughtful voice, "this will end my sale of the Regent, at least so far as they are concerned. With Grierson out of the deal, Mertle is hardly in position to go through with it alone."

It was evident that, facing the door, they had noted the exit of Mertle and the girl. Although on the other side of the room, Reardon's ears, like microphone extensions reached out and caught much of what was going on beyond.

From the snatch of conversation he had just heard, it seemed that Grierson and Mertle, pooling their finances, had proposed a joint purchase of the theatre.

"Oh, well," Howard Sarson said consolingly, "it might not have gone through anyway, if there was anything in the talk going around."

"What do you mean?" Kelter asked sharply.

"You've heard it as well as I have," the manager said with a shrug. "Erle and Dave were the best friends in the world till Ruth Wesson came into the picture. On the surface they were friendly rivals for her smiles—but did you ever hear of *friendly* rivals where a woman was concerned?"

"Perhaps Mertle may be able to scrape the money together somehow," Sarson suggested hopefully.

"He won't," Kelter negatived emphatically, and for a moment Reardon wondered if the producer really wanted the sale to go through.

"The other bidder is still left," the manager said with a smile.

"Yes, with a cool hundred thousand less," Marcus Kelter said with a wry look. "Come again. See if you can't do a little better." Howard."

At this moment Lieutenant Ingram put in an appearance, accompanied by Otis the Bertillion expert, and Burton, investigator for the coroner.

"Who are those two outside?" Ingram snapped at his subordinate.

"Erle Merton and Ruth Wesson," Reardon informed him.

"Movie people, eh? Witnesses?"

"Important ones."

The lieutenant stuck his head out the door.

"Come in here, youse," he bellowed politely, and as the pair entered he turned to Reardon. "All right, Emmet, spill what you know."

The detective complied literally, carefully omitting whatever theories he had formed, as well as a very strong suspicion of what he believed Ruth Wesson's handbag contained.

"As I understand it," the lieutenant said, after a minute's survey, "Grierson occupied the front box on the right. Anyone in the box in back of him?"

"It was vacant," Howard Sarson said. "We thought it better not to sell seats in it because of its closeness to Grierson's act."

Ingram squinted from beneath bushy brows in silent study. The most dynamic man on the force, physically anyway, he was a contrast to the leisurely moving Reardon.

"How about the two boxes across?" he demanded abruptly of the manager.

"Mr. Kelter occupied the first alone, and Miss Wesson and Mertle the second."

Ingram grunted and nodded his head to Reardon.

"I want you to show me just how Grierson stood in the box before he fell. The rest of you stay here."

In the box, the detective posed by the dead man's chair in the attitude Grierson had adopted.

"This was his position at the time he fell," the detective indicated.

Ingram clucked exultantly.

"Just what I thought. He was facing across the theatre. Emmet, that bullet came from one of those two boxes on the other side."

"It couldn't have come from any place else very well," Reardon said heavily. "It's a cinch that no one was going to fire off a gun, even with a silencer on it, from any place on the orchestra floor, or the balcony either. He'd have been seen by everyone near him, even though the hiss of the silencer was timed with the explosion of the gun on the screen. That added to the silence of the murderer's weapon, but it didn't give it invisibility."

"As it is his chance of getting caught narrows down to one in two. Either Mertle or Kelter did it, of course."

"Why leave out the girl?"

"Why put her in?"

"She was sitting to the front of the box. She had a better opportunity to fire the shot than Mertle."

"I don't see it that way. She was watching the picture, so she was turned away from Mertle. He could have fired it from in back of her and she'd have never known it."

"Maybe he had a motive," Reardon persisted morosely.

"The same old triangle," the fat detective nodded.

"With Mertle on the third corner of it, eh?" the lieutenant deduced brightly. "Why, confound it, that clinches my case against Mertle. You haven't any reason to believe that Grierson's attentions to Miss Wesson were objectionable. That's pretty far-fetched. It's a lot more likely that Mertle resented Grierson's rivalry and put him out of the way."

"Perhaps so," Reardon conceded, "but—" After all, he hadn't actually seen the thing in the girl's bag. He had only felt it, which would hardly convince a jury.

"But what?" quizzed Ingram.

"But what about Kelter?" swerving into a different channel. "His opportunity was as good as Mertle's."

"What about him? Grierson's popularity and ability as an actor had helped make Kelter rich. Why put him out of the way when still more shekels were to be made?"

"It's not just clear to me why he should," the detective admitted, "but I heard Kelter and Sarson talking. A big deal was on. Mertle and Grierson were to buy the Regent from Kelter, who you know, owns it. I'll confess I can't figure out a motive, but for some strong reason Kelter at the last moment might not have wanted the deal to go through."

"Maybe," Ingram suggested sardonically, "if you can figure out a better motive than that I'll listen to you. That one sounds awful thin. But come on. Let us go through this crowd—see if one of them is crazy enough to have a gat on him."

The three men and the girl were waiting for them.

"We're going to the boxes where you folks were sitting," Ingram told them crisply, leading the way. There was an exchange of glances, but no comment, as they fell into line. When they reached the boxes, however, Howard Sarson, perhaps because of his capacity as manager of the house, felt it incumbent upon him to utter a few remarks.

"I hope you're not foolish enough to suspect that the people in these boxes were in any way involved."

Marcus Kelter had gone a shade paler, as if at the realization that he was under suspicion.

"You don't mean that you suspect me—us, officer?" he gasped. "I warn you, don't get too smart! I have influence. Besides, Sarson was in my box just before that shot was fired. He knows I had no gun. He'll testify for me."

"Is that right, Sarson?" Ingram demanded. "Were you in his box?"

"Well," the manager hesitated, evidently knowing that he was going on record, "it was a minute or so before Grierson fell. I wanted to be at the smoking room when the ushers brought Grierson in, so I had to leave. Certainly Mr. Kelter had no gun then."

"In his hand you mean," Ingram snorted. "Naturally he wouldn't—while you were there."

"Is that a definite accusation?" the producer blustered, but his small eyes were wide with apprehension.

"Of course not," the lieutenant deprecated. "But so long as you have no gun, you won't object to us searching you, will you?"

There was a tense moment of silence. All realized the portent of Ingram's words. That delicate line of demarcation which separates the innocent witness from the potentially guilty suspect had been crossed. Search unavoidably carries an implication of guilt. Marcus Kelter and Mertle stood with their backs against the parapet that surrounded the box. Although more restrained than his employer, Erle Mertle looked like a man under a severe ordeal.

Ruth Wesson, naturally perhaps, showed the keenest evidence of strain. She had seated herself, as if from weakness, in the same chair she had occupied during the performance. Her lips, taut, now quivering, made a carmine slash upon the pallor of her face. Her eyes were turned upon Erle Mertle, piteous, appealing, as if beseeching protection. On her knees she gripped in convulsive fingers the expensive handbag.

Scientific Deduction Wins!

"**W**E'LL begin the search with this," Detective Reardon said with what sounded like a sigh of resignation, reaching for the bag.

"Please," Reardon said, quite gently.

Perhaps it was the friendly voice, or she had had time to reconsider. She became more composed, and surrendered the bag quiescently. With it in his hands, the detective looked up alertly. On the parquet below, beneath the box, had sounded a soft, padded thump.

"What was that?" demanded Lieutenant Ingram.

Marcus Kelter squinted downward.

"Just a seat that dropped down, I guess."

With a very thoughtful look upon his face, Reardon returned the bag to Ruth Wesson. He didn't bother to open it. It wasn't necessary. The revolver was no longer in it.

Reardon had appreciated the possibility that the girl would slip the weapon to Erle Mertle. On the other hand, it was imperative that he overhear the conversation between Kelter and

Howard Sarson. It was from this, indeed, that he had gleaned the only motives for the crime they had then to work upon. So he had not followed the man and the girl when they had slipped from the smoking room.

Requesting the actor to hold out his hands, the detective now proceeded upon this quest. Mertle submitted without protest. Reardon concluded the search indifferently. The actor's willingness was in itself assurance that no weapon would be found. Reardon didn't seem nonplussed.

Detective Reardon gave Lieutenant Ingram a large wink.

"I just happened to think I want to see Burton before the body is removed," he said soberly. "Will you search the other two men, Lieutenant?"

"Sure," agreed Ingram, curious but discreet. "Go ahead. Miss Wesson and Mertle okay?"

"Yes, they're all right."

Reardon hurried in his heavy way up the aisle of the balcony to the mezzanine stairs leading below. He knew the door of the smoking room could not be seen from that particular box, so his failure to visit it would hardly be observed. A minute or two later he was in the parquet, making his way unseen from above along the wall to that section directly beneath the box. He found without trouble what he had come to look for. In the third seat, wedged between the V made by the upholstered seat and the back when the seat was pushed up, was a .28 caliber revolver with a silencer attachment.

Of course it had been dropped from the box above. Reardon had instantly suspected the meaning of that soft thump. That it had caught between the seat instead of clattering upon the floor had been due to chance. He was on the point of ascending the stairs to the balcony again when the faint murmur of voices above caught his ear. Ruth Wesson and Mertle were coming down.

The voices of the descending couple became startlingly distinct with that tendency of sound to magnify in a large, enclosed space when other noises, incidental to the presence of a crowd, are absent. Certainly they were unaware of the carrying power of their words, as they made no effort to subdue them.

"I tell you again, Ruth," Mertle was saying in strident denial, "the gun is not mine! Great heavens, girl, do you think I'd murder one of the best friends I ever had."

"But you did quarrel with him," was the tremulous reminder—"about—about me."

"Oh, I know I did, Ruth. But it was a flash of temper. You know how crazy I am about you. Where you're concerned I forget all discretion."

"Be careful not to tell that to anyone else," she warned him.

"But how do you account for the gun, the murder weapon without a doubt, that I found under your chair in the box?"

"I can't account for it, Ruth. I don't know a thing about it. I haven't the least idea how it got there."

"I'm afraid that plea wouldn't make much of an impression on a jury. It was a lucky break for you, Erle, that I chanced to strike it with my foot, and hid it in my bag."

"**A**ND it was a lucky break for you," Mertle twitted her., "that you'd passed the gun on to me. Your bag was the first thing that fat detective went for. When he picked it up for you, he must have thought it was heavy. And it was a lucky break for both of us that I was able to get rid of the thing over the side of the box."

They had reached the bottom of the stairs, Reardon rose to greet them. They shrank back in dismay.

"You—you heard!" the girl gasped, her blue eyes distended.

"Plenty," the detective assured her. "Come upstairs again."

"But I tell you that isn't my gun," Mertle cried, in a tempest of frenzy. "You can't prove that it is."

"Can you prove that it isn't?"

That was a different matter. The probability that he could not disprove the charge threw the actor into a cold sweat of terror. His nerve deserted him and he made a mad dash for the door. The huge right foot of the corpulent detective shot out with the celerity of the tongue of a toad with designs on a fly. Mertle slid along the mosaic floor on his hands and knees, Reardon picked him up and gave him a persuasive shove towards the stairs.

"What's the idea of this?" Ingram wanted to know as the detective and his two charges came down the aisle towards the box. Assisted by Otis, the Bertillion man, he had just concluded a frisk of Kelter and Howard Sarson. "I told them that they could go."

"You told them too soon," Reardon returned morosely. He pushed the heavy portiere aside to follow Ruth Wesson and Merle into the box.

"What do you mean 'too soon?'" the lieutenant demanded irascibly.

Reardon produced the pistol with the silencer.

"Mertle dropped this over the side of the box just before I searched him," he explained. "I picked it up from a seat downstairs where it fell."

Ingram grabbed the gun with avidity, his eyes sparkling as they noted the silencer.

"How do you know that it was him that dropped it?"

The detective nodded his head towards the girl, but his thoughts seemed elsewhere.

"Ask her. She'll tell you."

Ruth Wesson's chin tilted.

"It's true," she stated, her glance arraigning Mertle in cold contempt. The actor's attempt to escape had to her been a confession of guilt, as the astute Reardon realized.

Mertle stared at her in a sort of stunned stupor, his eyes hurt. He opened his mouth to speak, but closed it firmly. There were many things he might have said. He might have told that it was she who had given him the gun, but he did not. Reardon could have imparted the same information, but the moment was not opportune. His mind was seeking other channels of investigation. He turned abruptly to the trio of men involved in the case.

"I want you three fellows to stand up in a row," he requested succinctly, to the amazement of his superior officer.

"Now what?" queried the perplexed Ingram.

"Go ahead—do as I say," commanded the detective.

They acceded somewhat sheepishly. It became evident that Reardon was comparing their heights. Erle Mertle was of medium stature, probably five feet nine; Sarson was a tall man and stood a good six feet one; Marcus Kelter was hardly more than five feet seven, the short, thick-set type.

"So you're willing to testify, Sarson, that up to the time you left Kelter's box he showed no war-like preparations to take Grierson's life?" There was a sceptical gleam in the big detective's eyes.

"I am," the manager returned emphatically.

"Still, you admit you left him one minute before the fatal shot was fired. Isn't that true?"

"Well, yes, it is."

"You're going to get in trouble, Reardon," Marcus Kelter protested tremulously, "if you keep on hinting that I fired that shot."

"Hint?" the detective questioned scornfully. He faced Kelter again. "When did you first get this idea of having Sarson in the box in connection with the picture?"

"Oh, a week or ten days ago."

Reardon faced Ruth Wesson and Mertle.

"Were you two continuously in the box till after that time when the shot which killed Grierson had actually been fired?"

"Yes, we were," they chorused in unison.

"And you, Kelter?"

"I never moved out of it till the boy came and told me what had happened," the producer averred fervently.

"I understand that you are the owner of the Regent Theatre,

Kelter, and that you were on the point of selling it to Grierson and Mertle when this murder occurred to-night?"

"Yes, that is so," Kelter admitted.

"A theatre like this should prove a pretty good investment, eh?"

"It is considered one of the best-paying houses west of Chicago."

"Why do you want to dispose of it, then?"

Kelter shrugged his shoulder.

"It is just one too many irons in the fire for me. When my outfit abandoned the project of acquiring a string of theatres, this was left on my hands. I simply couldn't do justice to it and the picture-producing business at the same time."

"The credit for the theatre's success, I suppose, belongs in a large measure to its efficient management?"

"Of course. Sarson is an experienced man. He owned a theatre in the East, which he sold to manage the Regent for me."

REARDON faced Howard Sarson.

"Having built up the theatre's prestige, and knowing its value as a money-maker, you were quite anxious to acquire it."

"Yes, I would like to have bought it," Sarson confessed with a rueful smile. "But I couldn't quite swing it."

"In other words, the returns netted by the sale of your theatre in the East was about one hundred thousand dollars below the price Grierson and Mertle offered Kelter for the Regent?"

"That's the amount I was short in matching their bid, yes."

"But if their bid was eliminated, you'd be high, eh?"

There was no change in the expression of Howard Sarson's face.

"Why, yes, that would be rather effective," he conceded with a knife-edged smile. "But why do you ask my opinion?"

"Because it's a matter on which you happen to be especially well-informed," Reardon returned bluntly. "With Grierson murdered and Mertle accused of the crime, you had everything your own way, Sarson. And you wanted the Regent Theatre as you'd never wanted anything before in your life. This was your *big* opportunity, the one you couldn't afford to let pass."

"The first thing about this peculiar crime that strikes me is that it was all carefully planned before-hand. And the plans, Sarson, are all yours. The idea of putting Grierson in the audience and working him in with the picture was your idea. You made the arrangements, which seated the puppets you proposed using to accomplish your purpose, just as you wanted them."

Howard Sarson shook his head at the detective in mild reproof.

"Why, all you've done," he argued suavely, "is to establish a possible motive for me committing such a crime. That's a long ways from having the goods on me."

Reardon drew his service pistol and focused it upon the theatre manager.

"I'm telling you now, Sarson, that I *have* the goods on you, and if you make one move to escape I'll salt you with lead." He turned to the gaping Ingram. "Lieutenant, take a look at that curtain on the right, which shuts this box off from the passage running back to the balcony. That's right—now pull that fold apart. What do you see?"

Ingram's breath escaped him in a noisy whistle.

"A little slit in it. Looks like an eye-hole."

"Exactly what it is, in fact. Sarson's eye peered through it as, after leaving Kelter's box, he poised himself with pistol and silencer to await the explosion of the gun on the screen. Notice, that while standing in this position, he wouldn't be observed from the balcony, or any place else in the house. Now what do you see a little lower down to the right of that slit."

"A bullet hole!"

It was evident that Reardon had gauged his man correctly. Cold-blooded, calculating, it was clear that all that deterred Sarson from resorting to some desperate expedient to escape was the gun trained upon him. His teeth showed wolfishly.

"All right," he snarled. "Say Grierson *was* killed that way. Where's the proof that I'm the killer?"

Reardon eyed him in offended surprise.

"Proof?" he echoed. "Why you're the only living person that possibly could have done it! Miss Wesson, Mertle and Kelter, a theatre-full of people will testify, were in their seats when Grierson fell with that bullet in him.

"And if you want additional proof—listen to this: You are inches taller than any one else in the boxes at that time, Sarson. That slit was made for *your* eye, not a shorter person's. Not one of them could have looked through it, even had he stood on his toes.

"That murder was a cool, icy piece of business, Sarson. But when I think of you reaching under the curtain and planting that gat under Mertle's chair so that he'd be charged with the murder—before you began your dash for the smoking room." It makes me hot all over."

Ruth Wesson held out an appealing hand to Mertle as the prisoner was led away.

"I'm awfully sorry, Erle," she said contritely.

"It's all right, Ruth." His smile exonerated her. It was almost worth the ordeal to see her penitent. "Honestly, I was beginning to wonder myself if I wasn't guilty."

THE END

The Avenging Note

By Alfred Sprissler

SENHOR Dom Henrique Othão Guimarães, a wealthy man of excellent breeding and deportment, although at heart a rascal, was entertaining in the lavishly furnished salon of his almost regal country place at Aldeia Azul, some five kilometers outside of Lisbon. One person only was the recipient of this entertainment, and that was the so delectable and petite Senhorinha Inês de Silvestre, the première danseuse in the Modern Theatre.

And this, but one month to the day after his beautiful young wife, Dona Constança, had died of a mysterious illness.

Amid all the splendor of that ornately garnished apartment there stood one memento of Constança—her harp. Fully strung, the instrument seemed, at least to the superstitious servants, to be mutely awaiting Dona Constança's light touch.

"But you are very beautiful, Inês," said Guimarães, raising a glass of wine to her encarnadined lips with his free hand.

She looked at him through half-closed lids. "Kiss me!" she murmured. Their lips barely touched. . . . He started suddenly.

"You heard something?" he asked hoarsely.

"Only the beating of my heart," she answered.

"No, no, I mean a sound, a noise. . . ."

"Of course not," she smiled. His arms tightened about her.

"There! I hear it again!"

"My timid goose!" she said, a little petulantly. "It is but your imagination."

"Perhaps!" And he gulped down his wine.

"There! There! Again!" He looked about the room.

"Only tell me, Henrique," she implored, "what you heard."

"I can't—" But his eyes were fastened in a fixed stare upon the harp. She noted that glance. And then. . . .

A low, minor musical note, like a chord from a celestial harp, long, low and plangent.

She gasped. "I heard it!" She extricated herself from him and ran across the room. She put her hands on the harp.

"The strings are quiet, Henrique."

He gulped down another glass of wine. "Best go to your room," he said. "Await me there."

She needed no second invitation and, gathering her filmy drapery about her, she fled through the door, out into the corridor. But she did not go to the room. She donned her cloak and ran out of the house.

Guimarães, alone, stared at the harp as one stares at a cobra, petrified with fear. He trembled as with the ague.

Again!

He blanched at the sound. It was as if his dead wife had been translated to the harp and was accusing him in the dull, funereal cadence of that constantly repeated note.

Again!

He rushed to an escritoire, tore open a drawer, snatched out a revolver. He looked insanelly at the harp.

Again!

He aimed at the harp and pulled the trigger. His palsied hand spoiled his aim, and the bullet crashed through a portrait on the wall.

Mad with fear, he turned the revolver on himself.

* * * *

Jan Nikolaas Beets, consultant of the Lisbon detective department, sat alone in his bare little office, patiently filling his pipe. He was a shapeless hulk of a man, quite overflowing his swivel chair. Completely bald, with a face as pink and as unwrinkled as a child's, his age was indeterminable.

An officer entered with a paper.

"Good morning, Senhor Beets," he said deferentially. "Here is the usual list." Beets looked at him helplessly. The man put the paper on the desk.

"Erumph!" coughed Beets. "Nothing unusual, inspector, is there? Hello, my old friend Cachimbo. We got him in 1926 for coining... and Madame du Bois, theft of some jewelry. Likewise, my fellow countryman Smet... up to his old swindles. Pfooh! There is a crowd of low class habituals for you! But what's this... Henrique Othão Guimarães... attempted suicide... I expected something of the sort... that swine called me a fat slug. His wife died one month ago yesterday. Physicians baffled... very suspicious... two of the best medical authorities said it was tetanus. But they were unable to say how she got it. Too bad he didn't kill himself... called me a fat slug!"

"I Suspect"

BEETS smoked reflectively, staring at the inkstand as if he had never seen it before. The peculiar circumstances surrounding Dona Constança's death had interested him mightily and he had gone to Aldeia Azul to make inquiries. Guimarães, as a man of good family, had resented the intrusion of the police into his grief. But, Beets thought, the grief of the sorrowing husband had not been borne out by his intimacy with Senhorinha de Silvestre.

Sighing heavily, Beets unhooked the telephone and called a number.

"What's that, doctor... likely to die... delirious? Does he say anything? He does? Very strange, isn't it? Much

obliged!" He hung up. Slowly and deliberately he climbed to his feet, and shuffled rather than walked into the palatial mahogany and glass office of the director.

"Seems to be something strange about that Guimarães affair," he stated abruptly.

"Nothing at all, Senhor Beets. Grief over the death of his excellent wife, that is all. A brilliant man, that, but too emotional, too highly strung."

"Yes? Well, he chose strange ways to assuage his grief and he picked good comforters."

"What do you mean?"

"He has been cavorting around with the de Silvestre. I asked you to have her watched, you know?"

"But my dear friend, as much as I admire your deductive talents and methods, I fail to see why you asked that. There was nothing suspicious in that. But stay, you had trouble with Dom Henrique just after his wife died. You seemed to hint at foul play."

"I never hint," said the Dutchman succinctly. "Listen: your Dom Henrique was one of your great men of high life. He married Senhorinha Constança de Fonteventura for her money. He didn't have an *escudo* himself. She dies. He gets her money according to the terms of a prenuptial agreement, plus a staggeringly big amount of insurance. The cause of death was doubtful, and when I call to investigate there is a husband who calls me—Jan Nikolaas Beets—a fat slug. Then I suspect."

"Just drop it," the director begged. "If Senhor Guimarães dies . . . what a disgrace! If he lives we can't plague him with importunities. The press has been instructed to say he was shot while examining a revolver. Think of his family."

"I'm going out to Aldeia Azul to look things over at any rate, Senhor Director."

"So be it. But tell me, why do you connect Inês de Silvestre with this attempted suicide?"

"She was with him last."

Beets plodded back to his bare office and sank into his chair with a profound sigh. He filled and lit his pipe, and then gave himself up to thinking about the Guimarães case. Outwardly he seemed to go to sleep, his somnolent eyelids drooping and his breathing sinking into peaceful regularity. A clerk, entering with a packet of neatly-arranged correspondence, thought the Dutchman asleep, and tiptoed silently out of the room.

BUT inside Beets' brain there was much activity. Disconnected thoughts, all centered upon Guimarães, Dona Constança and Inês de Silvestre, followed each other in rapid

succession. Evening came, and still the detective did not move, except to light his pipe.

It was only at eight o'clock that he finally awoke from his "trance." He raised the telephone.

"Get me," he murmured, "Doctor Espina at the Hospital of the Good Friends." Then a moment later: "Beets speaking, doctor. Any change in Guimarães? . . . So . . . Delirium increases . . . Before you administer the opiate would you please hold the telephone near his mouth . . . much obliged!"

Beets listened five minutes. Then: "Do you hear me, doctor? He seems to be raving about a note . . . a note on the . . . yes . . . I understood that . . . Let me know if his condition changes, and . . . doctor, don't let the swine die!"

There was a puzzled look upon the broad face. This wild talk of a note . . . There was a knock on the door. "Enter!" he cried. An officer entered.

"A man and a woman want to see you," he stated. "Herculano and Maria Moreno."

"Let them be admitted!"

Considerably ill at ease the Morenos entered. Maria, a very pretty young woman of twenty, looked at the expressionless face of the Dutchman with amazement and her black eyes seemed to doubt that this was the great detective, seldom seen, whose workings were so uncannily infallible. Her husband, a young man in chauffeur's garb, was sullen.

"And now," he began, speaking to Maria in a sing-song voice, "You are Maria Moreno, born Abreu, originally from Figural in Alemtejo, and were maid to Senhorinha Constança Fonteventura for several years. When she married Senhor Guimarães she retained you, urged her husband to hire the so-worthy Herculano as chauffeur, and brought you both to Aldeia Azul. Am I correct?"

Maria was staring at him in amazement. She nodded.

"There are certain questions I would ask," he went on, placidly. "Remember, there are just three of us in the room, and no one will copy down your words. You both may speak in confidence. Have no fear."

He paused to take breath. "First of all, Maria, you were with Dona Constança, whom you loved and served faithfully, when she died." The girl nodded.

"You noted that her jaws were locked tight—that she had fits of spasms—that she had a high temperature even when she first said she felt ill." The girl nodded again.

"And now mark this carefully. What did she do the night before she died?"

"Well, Senhor," the girl began without hesitancy, "my mistress was in the salon with Dom Henrique. They dined at seven, but I noticed they were not on good terms."

"Your pardon," begged Beets. "But did they ever have disagreements?"

"Often. He made threats."

"Did you ever learn what these arguments were about?"

"Money. He wanted her to advance him a large sum, how much I do not know."

Clues!

"**H**UMM. And on this particular evening, what did they do in the salon?"

"Dom Henrique smoked a cigar and read. Dona Constança played the harp."

"The harp!"

"Yes, sir! She, poor thing, seemed to go always to her harp for comfort. I have heard master tell her many times to 'stop that damned tinkling.'"

"Did he say anything of that nature on this particular evening?"

"No, Senhor. He seemed to be watching her. At ten she called me, saying she felt unwell. She then retired. At six the following morning I heard her groan, and found her in great pain. I thought she was having a fit. I called Doctor do Amaral."

"And by ten she was dead?"

"Yes, sir."

"Herculano, do you remember if you ever drove Dom Henrique to 13 Rua das Graças, to 58 Rua Gomês or to 125 Rua Marau, all in the Bairro do Oriente?"

"No, sir, I never did." Beets frowned slightly. If poison had been used it had been obtained otherwheres than the places known to the police as suspicious.

"Humm. Did Dom Henrique have any horses?"

"Two riding horses." Beets smiled the merest ghost of a smile.

"Who was his veterinarian?"

"Doctor Amadeu de Bonfoi?"

"Ah, at 20 Avenida Nova?"

"The same."

"Now, mark this. Did he visit Doctor de Bonfoi some time before Dona Constança's illness?"

"Yes, about a month before."

"A thousand thanks. You are out of work now, Herculano?"

"Yes, sir. I can't keep a job. They . . ."

"I know. Take this paper tomorrow to Manoel Queixa, at the police garage. That will get you a berth."

Voluble in their thanks the two withdrew. Beets had seemingly gone into another trance. When he was alone he pressed a floor button with his foot. An officer entered.

"Bring the machine, Erminio." The man quitted the room and immediately re-entered pushing a dictaphone. "That's all."

The testimony of the Morenos had been taken, via a concealed detectograph, on dictaphone records.

BUT at ten the following morning Beets was at the door of the impressive Guimarães residence. To the butler, José Almeida, he showed his badge. And although Almeida was overflowing with information about the last tragedy in the house, Beets did not give him any opportunity to uncork it.

Beets explored the house thoroughly and gave special attention, not to the room in which the unfortunate woman had died, but rather to Guimarães' own apartment. Almeida frequently left him alone, some of the minor domestics calling the butler away on business connected with the management of the house. At length they entered the palatial salon.

The detective stopped and gazed about him in frank admiration. With almost childlike expressions of pleasure he pointed out various objects in the room, all to the accompaniment of a running fire of observations from Almeida.

"I understand, Almeida," said Beets, abruptly, "that you left Guimarães and Senhorinha de Silvestre alone at half past eleven on the night of the shooting."

"That is correct, sir," answered the butler, nodding his sleekly-dressed head emphatically.

"This revolver, Almeida," he shot at the butler, "where did Guimarães get it?"

"He usually kept it in that *escritoire*." Beets looked at the ornate desk in silence. His eyes then went on with their investigation. Suddenly they settled on what their owner had really been observing secretly since he entered the room.

"A harp, Almeida!" he cried, displaying more animation than his associates believed innate to him. "Did Senhor Guimarães play?"

"No, sir. In fact, he hated to hear Dona Constança playing, which she used to do every night they were at home. When he was away, on business, I presume, she played the harp all the time."

"And what did she play, Almeida? What kind of music?"

"Sometimes little folksongs, and sometimes difficult music that she got from Paris. But when she was alone she often sat at the harp and seemed to let her fingers wander over the strings, playing whatever they wanted to."

"Oh, Mr. Almeida, but you are a poet! And I, although you wouldn't believe it, am a musician. I am a harp player."

He sat down and tilted the instrument against his massive shoulder. He set the pedals at the first notch, and plucked a scale with his pudgy fingers.

"Pfooh! What an infernal noise!" he exclaimed, making a wry face at the discord. Almost automatically his right hand reached towards the wrest pins.

"Almeida, where is the tuning key to this harp?" he asked.

"I don't know, Senhor, and in fact I hadn't noticed it was gone. It's not on the floor, and nothing has been disturbed in the room. I'll look farther for" A telephone bell jangled. "Pardon, sir," he begged. "I must answer that."

The Mystery of the Note

AND then with surprising agility Jan Beets ran lightly across to the *escritoire*. "The revolver," he muttered, "was taken from the top drawer, which the policeman who attended the surgeon closed and sealed. The seal's intact." He wrenched open the drawer. It contained a box of ammunition, some old papers and the missing harp key.

He closed the drawer, and with the aid of a match resealed it. And so rapidly did he work that when Almeida returned he was back standing by the harp.

"That was your office calling, Senhor Beets. Your man told me to hold the wire and after five minutes he said it was all right, he didn't want to speak to you anyway."

Beets stared stupidly at the butler. Apparently he had not heard a word. "Where," he asked, "did Senhora Guimarães keep the extra strings?"

"In that music cabinet by the piano, Senhor," Beets walked over to the cabinet, opened it, and *brought out the tuning key*. He had palmed it.

"Now to tune the harp," he said cheerfully, while Almeida looked at him as if he were mad.

Beets fitted the T-shaped tuning key on a wrest pin. He started in surprise. He looked closely at the key. Then he removed it and dropped it in his capacious pocket.

But there remained, among other things to explain, that note the delirious Guimarães had raved about. Beets first thought that a current of air had caused the harp strings to resound, as with an Aeolian harp. But the taut strings of a modern harp do not respond in that manner, and the instrument was out of line with any window.

"Before I go," observed Beets, "I should like to examine the cellar."

"Yes, Senhor. This way, please."

They wandered through the capacious basement. "This," stated Almeida, "is directly beneath the salon. And then he cried: "That sluggard Paulo has forgotten to set that bucket again. Now the place is flooded with water."

It was true. There was a puddle on the cement floor, and from an overhead pipe water fell slowly drop by drop. Almeida brought a bucket.

Clunnnggg!

Beets started as if stung.

It was the avenging note!

He almost ran upstairs to the salon, with Almeida following. Standing by the harp they heard the dull, regular sound, like the sound of a solitary harp string.

Beets plucked a string. At the same time the drop of water struck the metallic bucket in the cellar.

"B-flat," observed Beets, quietly. "That is all I wish to know. *Bon dias*, Almeida."

ALMOST three weeks later Guimarães was discharged from the hospital of the Good Friends. Doctor Espina had telephoned Beets on the previous day and policemen had been sent to the hospital, so that when Dom Henrique emerged from the building that had so long sheltered him he was seized at once and conveyed to headquarters in a police car. And it was the irony of fate that the chauffeur of that car was Herculano Moreno.

The police took him at once to the Director's office, wherein were found, in addition to the Director himself, two strangers, one a dapper, professional-appearing young man with an exquisitely-cared-for moustache, and the other an artisan of some sort. Two clerks sat at a small table, ready to take down in shorthand all that transpired. Guimarães seemed stunned when he saw the professional-appearing young man, and evidently ill at ease when he encountered the wondering gaze of the workman.

"What does this mean?" he hoarsely asked the Director.

That official smiled soothingly. "A mere matter of form, Senhor Guimarães, a mere matter of form." The door opened and Jan Nikolas Beets shambled into the room, smoking his best meerschaum, from whence issued a dense black smudge.

"You have the floor, Senhor Beets," said the Director, lighting a cigarette, while marvelling that Beets had set the scene in this way. Seldom if ever was Beets personally on hand at the dénouement of a case; he usually let a minor functionary present the reports.

"Senhor Dom Henrique Othão Guimarães," he began, sleepily, "you are charged with the murder of your wife, Senhora Constança Fonteventura Guimarães, by tetanus bacilli injected into the palm of her right hand, on the evening of Thursday, June 4."

He paused and motioned to an officer to bring him an ash tray into which he carefully dumped the dottle from his pipe.

Then equally carefully he filled and lit it. The entire operation was maddeningly deliberate. Guimarães almost frothed at the mouth.

"I shall ask Doctor Amadeu de Bonfoi, doctor of veterinary medicine, to examine this small ground glass stopper." The professional-appearing young man took the bit of glass in his hand.

"Yes?" queried Beets, benignly.

"It's mine . . . that is . . . it has my private mark etched on the top," said the mystified veterinarian.

"Good!" beamed Beets. "Now, my good friend, you are a recognized authority on bacilli, toxins and the like. You have made an exhaustive study of them in the United States, the Argentine and in Portugal."

Trapped

THE Doctor, exceedingly gratified, bowed.

"In your laboratory you are constantly experimenting with bacteria, working on antitoxins, performing microscopies and the like."

The doctor bowed again.

"You make a practice of keeping cultures in glass vials as well as test tubes. The vials are stoppered with closures like the one you hold in your hand." The doctor nodded.

"You know the prisoner?" Beets shot at him.

"Yes," answered Bonfoi, readily. "I have treated animals belonging to him."

He visited you in your laboratory, did he not?"

"Yes, several times. He claimed to have a great interest in my work, and asked many questions, saying he was going to donate money to aid me to pursue my researches."

"Do you ever check up on the number of vials in your possession?"

"Frequently."

"Now mark this! Did you ever notice any missing?"

"Why, yes. It seems to me that about the last of May two of the bottles were missing."

"And you suspected nothing?"

"Why should I have done so? I blamed it on the carelessness of my assistant."

"Did you not think someone might have stolen them?"

"No. Why should anyone do that. They are valueless to anyone. What use could anyone make of those cultures?"

"That's all, doctor. Much obliged!"

Beets faced the Director. "We have proven that a vial, perhaps two vials, were stolen from this laboratory. I personally found that glass stopper, identified by Doctor Bonfoi, in a small

drawer of Senhor Guimarães' dressing table. In itself it was not suspicious. It could have belonged to a perfume vial. Yet that crudely etched mark on the top led me to believe it was not. I took the stopper, and, as the Americans would say, I took a chance. In the top drawer of an *escritoire* in the salon where the shooting occurred I found ammunition fitting the revolver with which Dom Henrique attempted to kill himself, and . . . *this!*" He thrust the harp key towards the artisan.

"Lourenço Lopês, locksmith, machinist and metal worker, did you make this object?"

"Yes, sir!"

"For whom?"

"This gentleman," and Lopês indicated the prisoner, whose contorted face showed that he knew he was trapped.

"Tell me about it."

"Well, this gentleman came into my shop with a key like this one only without the spring and the needle, and showed me a sketch of the new one he wanted made."

"Did he say what he wanted it for?"

"No, sir. And I didn't ask. 'Twas none of my concern. There was no harm in it, was there?"

"You are certain this was the man?"

"Positive." Beets beamed.

"Now, Senhores, you see it all. This harp key . . . watch me closely . . . contains a spring and needle in such a way that when the key is applied with any force to a wrest pin of the harp, the needle swiftly protrudes. It is a sort of hypodermic syringe.

"The prisoner evidently packed the interior of the key with cotton on which he had placed the tetanus bacilli, three centigrams of which is enough to kill a man. When his wife attempted to tune the harp with the prepared key, the needle jabbed her in the palm of the right hand, causing the infection that killed her the following day. That traumatic tetanus killed the victim is proven by her post mortem appearance, the immediate appearance of *rigor mortis*, which sometimes occurs even before the heart has ceased to beat, and the opisthotonic attitude of the victim, and the so called sardonic smile on her features.

"Opinion was first advanced that Senhora Guimarães was killed by strychnine, the symptoms of poisoning by that drug being similar in some respects to those of traumatic tetanus. In fact it is called toxic tetanus. In toxic tetanus the symptoms run a rapid course, a half hour, an hour or two sufficing to bring death. On the other hand, in traumatic tetanus life may be prolonged two or three days.

"In this case death occurred in fourteen hours. But as the victim received the contents of two ten-centigram vials of tetanus

bacilli, administered under the most favorable conditions, the period would be shortened considerably.

"A strange feature of this case is that the lethal needle left very little mark in the hand. Indeed, the best authorities state that traces of inflammation occur so infrequently that the localization of the exact spot where the infectious bacilli are introduced is difficult and often impossible.

"In this dastardly plot Guimarães had two innocent accomplices, Doctor Amadeu Bonfoi and Lourenço Lopês, both of whom knew nothing whatever of the prisoner's intentions.

"The harp key presented great difficulty. My investigators were nonplussed and baffled. Finally I placed a blind advertisement in a newspaper for a machinist who could construct a device for an inventor. I received some twenty answers. An operative, armed with a sketch I had made of this murderous key, made the rounds. Lopês' shop was the ninth shop he visited — and Lopês instantly mentioned the curious circumstance that he had made a duplicate for 'someone else'. Hence, there only remained to have Lopês here in order to identify the mysterious inventor.

"But it seems that Senhora Guimarães' harp avenged her. A month after her death the prisoner was entertaining a woman friend at his place at Aldeia Azul. They were startled by a sound, a regular sound, like the note of a harp. The prisoner's conscience worked upon him. He was panic-stricken. The woman fled. Guimarães took a revolver and fired at the harp to still its accusing note. He missed, and turned the gun on himself, inflicting a serious wound. The rest, Senhores, remains for the courts. I think a verdict of premeditated murder will be brought in. I think that is all."

The Director calmly lit a cigarette.

"Tell me, Dom Jan," he begged, "just what is this mysterious note you are always harping on?"

"Under the floor of the salon" Beets explained, "was a leaky water pipe. The water dropped into a bucket and the sound it made at regular intervals could be heard in the salon. It sounded exactly like a note on the harp. It was B-flat."

"Wonderful! Miraculous!" exclaimed the Director.

"I know it," said Beets, "and I think the prisoner has fainted."

When the room had been cleared Beets listened for some time to his chief's praises. "But why, Senhor Beets, did you concern yourself so much with this case in which you eclipsed all your previous efforts?"

"Senhor Guimarães insulted me," Beets replied. "He called me a fat slug."

— THE END —